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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANJUL 000620

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STATE PASS EXIM, USTDA, OPIC, USTR, PEACE CORPS; USDOC FOR
ITA; DAKAR PLS PASS TO DAO, ODC, AND RAO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2016
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BEXP, EAID, MASS, KMCA, KPAO, GA
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: JAMMEH'S RE-ELECTION AND OUR BILATERAL
TIES

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Following President Jammeh's re-election September 22, there are no indications as yet of any major policy or personnel changes in the offing, but he seemed as volatile and rough-hewn as ever in his post-election press conference.

The shortcomings in the electoral process highlighted the top U.S. priority in The Gambia -- promoting respect for human rights and democratic values, and, in particular, pressing the GOTG for a reversal of the negative human rights trend that was a key factor in the June suspension of The Gambia's MCA eligibility. In pursuit of the top U.S. priority here, we request increased funding in FY-07 so that we may implement capacity-building projects with the National Assembly and judiciary. Another key U.S. priority is promoting The Gambia's development and poverty alleviation efforts; our Peace Corps program plays a vital role in this respect, and we also urge continued involvement here by USAID and the U.S. Trade and Development Agency.

¶2. (C) Another crucially important bilateral interest relates to the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT); so far, there is no discernible impact on the GOTG's GWOT-related cooperation from Jammeh's overtures to Iran and Venezuela, but careful monitoring is in order. Yet another key bilateral interest centers on the Gambian military's contribution to international and regional peacekeeping operations, including in Darfur. We recommend that the GOTG be considered for an ACOTA "lite" program, especially if the Gambians increase their Darfur contingent from company to battalion size. We believe that our strategy for getting Jammeh to reverse the negative policy trends that resulted in suspension of MCA eligibility should be one primarily of sticks, but that a carrot or two should also be included -- when it clearly serves U.S. interests, not as a "favor" to Jammeh. END
SUMMARY.

OVERVIEW

¶3. (C) In the aftermath of President Yahya Jammeh's re-election September 22, there are no indications as yet of

any major policy or personnel changes in the offing. Some contacts had speculated that Jammeh, known for his frequent dismissals of cabinet members and other senior officials, might use his re-election to make some immediate cabinet changes -- in advance of his formal inauguration following Ramadan -- but none have occurred to date. In a press conference the day after his victory, Jammeh stated that he would use his new five-year mandate to continue pursuing what he portrayed as his fundamental objective -- the country's development. In his remarks, Jammeh came across as volatile and rough-hewn as ever, as he, inter alia, warned the media against publishing any material that could stir up social unrest, castigated the West for "400 years of exploitation" of The Gambia and Africa generally, and asserted his commitment to developing the country with or without foreign assistance.

14. (C) In his anti-Western diatribe, he did not mention the U.S (or any other country) by name. However, we gather from our post-election discussions with senior GOTG officials -- in particular, the senior presidential advisor, Secretary General Mambury Njie and Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary William Joof -- that he remains deeply resentful of the Millenium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) June 16 decision to suspend The Gambia's eligibility for the Millenium Challenge Account (MCA) program due to evidence of the GOTG's slippage in performance on various eligibility criteria in the "ruling justly" and "economic freedom" categories. We are told that Jammeh remains upset over the perceived abruptness of the decision to suspend and that the embarrassment to him was heightened by its timing -- in the run-up to the GOTG-hosted African Union Summit and preparatory meetings June 25-July 2. (In response, we have noted the advance warning of suspension given to the GOTG and the fact that its timing was totally unrelated to the Summit dates.)

ADVANCING THE TOP U.S. PRIORITY

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15. (C) The shortcomings in the just-completed electoral process highlighted the top U.S. priority in its Gambian relationship, advancing respect for human rights and strengthening democratic institutions. While foreign election observers judged that Jammeh's re-election "represented the will of the people," in the Commonwealth's formulation, such flaws as a campaign playing field substantially skewed in Jammeh's and his ruling APRC party's favor were noted. In short, the September 22 presidential election failed to achieve its potential as a milestone in The Gambia's democratization. With National Assembly and municipal elections set for 2007, we and the donor community generally now face the challenge of promoting improvements in the electoral process and, in particular, working to strengthen the capacity and autonomy of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Other donors, e.g., UNDP, EC, Britain's aid agency, DFID, will continue to take the lead in providing election-related financial assistance for these upcoming contests, given the lack of available USG funds.

16. (C) Promoting good elections, though, is but one element of our overarching task -- pressing the GOTG to reverse the negative human rights trend evident over the past year, a trend that was a key factor in the MCC's decision to suspend The Gambia's MCA eligibility. The GOTG's backsliding on human rights included, for example, arbitrary detentions of opposition politicians, intimidation of journalists and closure of a privately owned newspaper, and, following a failed coup plot in March, mistreatment of suspects taken into custody and their detention without charge beyond the legal limit of 72 hours. We continue to stress to the GOTG the imperative of its taking steps to reverse the negative human rights trend in order to prevent further damage to its standing at home and abroad -- and to begin to lay the groundwork for seeking reinstatement of MCA eligibility. So

far, however, the GOTG leadership has made little effort on this score, doubtless due in part to its preoccupation in recent months with arrangements for the African Union Summit and, subsequently, the presidential election campaign.

17. (C) In its efforts on behalf of an improved human rights environment, The Embassy will continue to use the full array of tools at its disposal, ranging from dialog with the GOTG and civil society to public diplomacy initiatives such as International Visitor Grants for human rights activists and workshops for journalists. We also intend to seek Washington funding in FY-07, under the ESF program, for capacity-building projects targetting the National Assembly and judiciary, in particular. While mindful of the stringent resource environment, we believe that additional resources are needed to maximize the effectiveness of our strategy for advancing the leading U.S. interest in this country. At present, our available resources consist largely of a meager (approx. dols 40,000 annually) DHRF fund. While we will continue to seek the optimal use of DHRF resources, we regard as amply justified a larger fund aimed at assisting the country's legislative and judicial branches in their efforts to emerge as viable checks on executive power.

PROMOTING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

18. (C) Another key U.S. priority is promoting The Gambia's economic development and efforts at poverty alleviation. With assistance to The Gambia under the MCA program put on hold due to the suspension of eligibility, our Peace Corps program remains the centerpiece of our development aid here, and it is vital that the program be maintained. We also deem it vital that, in the ongoing effort to reform U.S. assistance programs, the small-scale USAID-funded programs at this non-USAID presence post -- e.g., Self Help program, Ambassador's Fund for HIV/AIDS -- be preserved. Our Gambian contacts, both official and private, regularly express their appreciation for these programs, which invariably receive favorable coverage in the local media. (COMMENT: With bilateral assistance to The Gambia of dols 1.5 million to dols 2 million annually, the U.S. is not among major donors here; the latter include, inter alia, Taiwan, UK, and, among multilateral donors, the EC and UNDP. Nonetheless, in our presentations on U.S./Gambian ties, we emphasize that, as

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the world's leading donor to the UN, much of that organization's assistance to The Gambia is provided by the American taxpayer. END COMMENT)

19. (C) We also urge the continuation of support to private American firms contributing to The Gambia's economic development by the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA), which is currently funding two feasibility studies for investment projects here, involving construction of a petroleum storage terminal and coal-fired power plant. At present, U.S. private sector's investment in The Gambia is modest, totalling an estimated several million dollars. At the same time, American firms are showing increasing interest in The Gambian market, and the inauguration in June of a weekly direct flight between Baltimore and Banjul by North American Airlines will facilitate the strengthening of commercial and other links. True, the current volume of bilateral trade is minimal, and The Gambia has yet to take much advantage of its AGOA eligibility, with AGOA-qualified exports to the U.S. less than dols 100,000 annually. The Gambia's AGOA-related textile visa is expected to be finalized soon, although the country's prospects for significant textile exports to the U.S. are limited.

COOPERATION ON COUNTER-TERRORISM

110. (C) Another crucially important bilateral interest is the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). In recent years, Jammeh has

proven to be a useful partner in the GWOT, with the GOTG providing concrete support in several joint counter-terrorism (CT) operations. The GOTG has also been responsive in other CT-related activities; Gambian intelligence and security officials show no hesitancy in sharing even the most sensitive information with us and have indicated openness to whatever forms of cooperation we wish to pursue with them. (NOTE: We have no evidence at present, following the most recent joint CT operation in 2005, that Al-Qaida or other terrorist elements are currently active in The Gambia. While the country's Lebanese community includes sympathizers of Hizballah, there is no sign of their actual involvement in terrorist operations here, although, as elsewhere in Africa, they are presumably engaged in such activities as fund-raising on Hizballah's behalf. END NOTE)

¶11. (C) So far, Jammeh's recent overtures to Iran and Venezuela have had no discernible impact on Jammeh's and his government's CT-related cooperation; it remains unclear how far Jammeh will go in pursuing these overtures and we will obviously need to monitor them closely. We believe that, so long as Jammeh maintains the requisite cooperation in the GWOT, it is in our interest to, at a minimum, continue our current capacity-building assistance -- managed through other USG channels -- to the GOTG.

THE MILITARY SPHERE:

¶12. (C) A final key bilateral interest centers on the the Gambian military's contribution to international and regional peacekeeping operations. Over the years, the country's tiny, 1,000-man army has participated in various UN, ECOWAS, and AU peacekeeping forces, in, for example, Kosovo, East Timor, Liberia, and currently, Darfur. In recent discussion with the Ambassador, the Chief of Defense Staff, COL Lang Tombong Tamba, emphasized the GOTG's commitment to continued participation in foreign peacekeeping activities. He indicated the Gambians' willingness to consider increasing their current troop contingent in Darfur from a company to a battalion, but added that any such expansion of the Gambian contingent would require additional equipment from donors. Ambassador responded that he could make no commitments on this score, noting that heretofore our assistance to the AMIS forces in Darfur has been channelled through the AU, in coordination with other donors, rather than directly to troop contributing countries.

¶13. (C) Given what we see as the U.S. interest in strengthening African forces' peacekeeping capabilities and The Gambia's peacekeeping record to date, we recommend that it be considered for an ACOTA partnership, especially if it expands its Darfur contingent to a battalion. Given the

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Gambian military's small size, we assume that any ACOTA partnership with this country would be a "lite" version. We also note that two Gambian military officers attended an ECOWAS ACOTA-related conference in Accra in September. (NOTE: Our current military cooperation program here consists chiefly of a modest (approx. dols 100,000 annually) IMET program, occasional military-to-military programs in such areas as riverine operations, and ACSS activities. There is also a long-pending project, using unspent FMF funds, for a Navy MTT to provide technical assistance for the refurbishment of a U.S.-supplied patrol boat. Finally, The Gambia also benefits from DOD's Humanitarian Assistance, Excess Property, and Anti-HIV/AIDS programs. END NOTE)

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON STICKS AND CARROTS

¶14. (C) We believe that our strategy for getting Jammeh to reverse the negative policy trends that resulted in suspension of MCA eligibility should be one primarily of sticks -- the largest one being the suspension itself. At the

same time, we also believe that the strategy should include a carrot or two, when doing so clearly serves U.S. priorities, as opposed to granting a "favor" to Jammeh. This is the rationale behind our proposals for expanded human rights-related assistance targetting the National Assembly and judiciary, for continuation of our CT-related assistance, and for considering The Gambia for an ACOTA "lite" partnership so as to strengthen Gambian forces' peacekeeping capabilities. We are also concerned that a policy of only sticks may well be counterproductive, i.e. simply reinforcing his resentment toward the U.S. and leaving him -- bolstered by increasing amounts of aid from Taiwan, in particular -- ever more resistant to our approaches on behalf of an improved human rights and governance environment.

15. (C) True, the Gambian leader's erratic, autocratic behavior in past months means that we cannot simply take for granted his reliability and effectiveness as a partner. We will need to remain alert to any sign of his attempting to strengthen ties with Iran and Venezuela at the expense of U.S. interests. Finally, in pressing the GOTG to address the policy slippages on human rights and other areas, we will seek the cooperation of other donors -- the UK and EC, in particular -- who share our concerns and will, we hope, be prepared to make similar approaches to the GOTG..

STAFFORD